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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000723

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/06/2014

TAGS: PREL MARR MASS MOPS EC

SUBJECT: FIRST TAKE ON ECUADOR'S TERMINATION OF MANTA FOL
AGREEMENT

REF: A. QUITO 694
1B. QUITO 223

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Douglas Griffiths for Reasons 1.4 (b&d)
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¶1. (C) Summary: Acting Foreign Minister Jose Valencia and Under Secretary of Sovereignty Affairs Jaime Barberis met with Charge and Polcouns on July 29 to formally hand over a diplomatic note canceling the Manta FOL agreement (Ref A). The Charge expressed disappointment over the manner in which the termination of the agreement was communicated; the MFA responded that the diplomatic note was prepared on the basis of consultations with U.S. military officers at the Manta Forward Operating Location (FOL) and in Quito. Possible explanations for the timing of terminating the agreement include actions by some individuals within the GOE to curry favor or an attempt to further the government's domestic and international political agendas. One source told us that the President was "pained" that the issue had not been properly coordinated, explaining that the GOE was merely trying to meet what they considered to be a deadline for notifying their intent not to renew the treaty. The Ecuadorian press focused its coverage of the announcement in large part on the gap the closing of Manta will leave in counter-narcotics efforts. (End Summary)

¶2. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Valencia requested a meeting on July 29 with the Charge, during which he personally handed the original of the diplomatic note, that had been faxed to the Embassy the evening of July 28 (Ref A), notifying of the GOE's decision to terminate the Manta FOL agreement. The Charge expressed disappointment in the manner in which the termination of the agreement was communicated, since the MFA press release was sent out within moments of faxing the diplomatic note to the Embassy, leaving no time to share it with Washington before calls started from the press. The Charge added that the GOE's approach caused some confusion at the Embassy and in Washington regarding the GOE's intentions.

Lack of Coordination or Misconstrued Communication?

¶3. (C) Valencia apologized and attributed the problem to a

lack of coordination within the GOE. He also assured us that the content had been coordinated with the U.S. and seemed sincerely surprised that the Embassy was not aware of any such coordination. Barberis said that following SOUTHCOM Admiral Stavridis' visit to Quito June 9-11, Defense Minister Ponce instructed the Ecuadorian commander of the Eloy Alfaro Air Base in Manta to coordinate withdrawal plans with the head of the FOL. Barberis added that Defense Vice Minister Carvajal had met on the subject with U.S. military representatives in Quito. (Note: The DATT met with Carvajal only days prior to the note, and affirmed that the USG fully intended to continue operations per the terms of the agreement, i.e until November 11, 2009, departing one year later. The DATT, Mil Group and FOL commanders all confirmed that they had not discussed with Ecuadorian officials the specifics of the FOL departure timeline.) The Charge stressed that this issue gets to the heart of the bilateral relationship and merits close coordination. The Charge recommended that the Foreign Ministry involve senior Embassy representatives in such policy discussions and stressed the need to coordinate closely as planning moves forward on Manta.

¶4. (C) Valencia and Barberis seemed entirely sincere and understanding of the message. They have always been cooperative with us, and Valencia was a close friend of the Embassy long before assuming his current position (he was director of the NGO Citizen Participation, funded in part by USAID, before his appointment as Vice Minister). They expressed their interest in working with the U.S. on this and other issues, including the bilateral dialogue, and regretted any indication of a lack of good faith.

¶5. (C) Seeking additional clarification and explanation, Charge discussed the issue with a close contact, Camilo Saman, former governor of Guayas Province and Correa's campaign treasurer. Charge made it very clear that we were disappointed by the lack of coordination with us on this important matter and with the unprofessional way that the MFA had notified the press before the Embassy. After checking with the President, Saman said that Correa was saddened by the U.S. reaction. The President insisted that he had been told that the schedule had been coordinated with "U.S. military" representatives, and that there was a rush to formally advise the USG, as the treaty required a one year notice of the intent not to renew the agreement. Saman said that the President specifically referred to the recent "successful" visit of Security minister Larrea to Washington and the impending arrival of the new ambassador as signs that he meant no offense to the USG.

A Serious Gap

¶6. (C) The announcement was covered extensively in the press, which focused on Department Spokesman Sean McCormack's comment that closing the FOL will "leave a serious gap in the efforts by the U.S. and its partners in the fight against narcotrafficking." Anyone who had hoped for a stronger reaction from the U.S. following this announcement must certainly be disappointed that the USG continues to accept the GOE's decision, and that the future of counter-narcotics efforts in the hemisphere has been put into question.

Comment

¶7. (C) The timing of the note may well have been the result of true believers within President Correa's Proud and Sovereign Fatherland (PAIS) movement in the presidential palace and at the Ministry of Defense who manipulated events for their own political agendas. One possible scenario is that Correa mentioned the need to have a strategy for the handover to aides who, in search of his favor and fearful of his wrath, scampered to pull it off. Currying public, nationalist favor ahead of the September 28 referendum on the draft constitution is another likely domestic political motive. The desire of the President or someone in the GOE for Ecuador to be able to announce the termination of the agreement at the Non-Aligned Meeting in Tehran may also have

been a factor. Given that Foreign Minister Salvador subsequently announced that the GOE had give the U.S. "one year's notice," a legalistic explanation of the timing is that if August 2009 is the GOE's desired date for the FOL suspending operations, then the GOE might have seen the need to give a year's notice of their intent to terminate, in a mistaken interpretation of Article 24 of the agreement on Manta. Yet another legalistic explanation is that the MFA may want to preempt any complications for the FOL before the probable approval of the draft new constitution on September 28, as it includes language forbidding any foreign military installations on Ecuadorian soil (Ref B). Whether through incompetence or ideology, the GOE blundered on this important issue, and thus far has failed to reap any public relations benefit outside of the meeting halls of the Non Alignment Movement (NAM). Post will continue to follow up with contacts in an effort to get a better understanding of this decision.

CDA Griffiths